



Help needed

Anthony Bourdain's impact on the region will be felt forever, but larger industry questions still linger



Anthony Bourdain

To look for meaning in the face of tragedy is a quintessentially human response. Faced with a death, it feels like it ought to mean something. Whether it's the stuff

of philosophy—ancient or modern—or more personal, it feels there must be something more to it than just a crossing over.

Such was the case in the days following Anthony Bourdain’s death. It certainly was for me. I’d begun writing about food and culture (with doses of history and politics tossed in) before I knew of Bourdain and before *Kitchen Confidential*. But it took Tony Bourdain to really show me the way.

Javier Plascencia



San Diego food blogger Scott Koenig (agringoinmexico.com) speaks for many Bourdain fans when he says, “Bourdain’s *No Reservations* motto of ‘I write, I travel, I eat...and I’m hungry for more’ struck a chord.”

Bourdain showed fans larger and hidden parts of the world and, for many, they often didn’t know what they were missing. Bourdain’s Baja episode of *No Reservations* meant a lot to the region. Javier Plascencia says, “He didn’t put Tijuana on the map but helped get a lot of people’s attention to come and see... A lot of people came for the first time,

especially younger people, and they wanted to go the places he went.”

The change had already happened, but Bourdain recognized it and told the world about it. But perhaps the group to whom Bourdain meant the most was the region's chefs.

“He was an idol, people looked up to him—I looked up to him,” Plascencia says. “He was just a true idol because of how he lived his life, what he wrote.”

He meant even more to Latino chefs, shining a light on the fact that the cooks in the back-of-the-house tended to be Mexican. He brought them out of the shadows.

“Nobody talked about that, it's a big loss,” says Plascencia. “Talk to every cook—Mexican or Latino—they *know* who Bourdain was. He talked kitchen language. He was the real thing. He wasn't faking it.”

Urban Solace Chef Matt Gordon observes that “Bourdain got out” of the industry.

“He was the first to say he wasn't a chef. He was a badass... basically, what every guy wishes he could be,” says Gordon. “From a chef's perspective, we didn't lose a chef. He stopped being that before we ‘knew him.’”

Kat Humphus



Chef Kat Humphus says the “chance to ‘get out’ of that rugged and grungy part of the restaurant industry” is exactly what Bourdain represented to those still working within it.

The first question asked by many—industry and non-industry—upon hearing of Bourdain’s death was “why?” Why did the guy who was seemingly living the dream, the ex-chef who “got out,” hang himself? Others dismissed the question itself as an invitation to speculate on the unknowable.

Cesar Vallin, managing partner of Cloak & Petal, says he doesn’t “believe it’s fair for anyone to speculate.” But most, even some of those who thought it was unfair to hazard a guess, see the answer as clear: depression. If, as seems likely, depression was the root cause of Bourdain’s suicide—he left many clues to that effect throughout his over 300 episodes of four different shows (five more episodes, at various states of completion before his death, are set to air this fall)—he would definitely not be the first high profile chef to go that route. The most striking example was Bernard Loiseau. The chef/owner of La Côte d’Or, at the time of his death, was the single

most recognizable Chef in France. More recently, Benoît Violie—the Chef of Switzerland’s Restaurant de l’Hôtel de Ville— took his own life.

As Mission Avenue Bar & Grill’s William Eick pointed out, “many other successful chefs have killed themselves, but almost none as publicized as Bourdain.” Industry depression can often be attributed to the nature of the job. Eick observes “the hours... are less than ideal in terms of mental health.”

Davin Waite, chef/owner of Wrench & Rodent Seabasstropub, thinks that in order “to understand the mental health issues chefs face, you first have to begin to understand the types of individuals that thrive in the kitchen environment.” It’s a love, a passion and a career he says, but also a compulsion.

“We were born to do it because personally we are miserable doing anything else,” Waite says.

Matt Gordon



Chef Matt Gordon goes on to describe that starting in the industry is a terrifying, dangerous, locker room environment. After-shift drinks and drugs is the norm, not the exception. Humphus takes it further.

“Many kitchens were originally a place of refuge for people,” Humphus says. Even chefs at “those fancy schmancy kitchens that are insanely clean

and attract only the very driven and serious, even they have some of the same tendencies as those [in kitchens with] coke-heads and pre-breaded chicken tenders.”

The atmosphere is intensely competitive, and its denizens are unwilling to fail at all costs. Showing weakness is often a fate worse than death. There is nothing healthy about kitchen life. The hours all but prohibit a normal non-work life.

Asked why he would put in those sorts of hours when he didn't have to, Eick responds: “because that's what we do.” The hours, the lifestyle: It changes you.

Still, there's talk of changes; talk of support and finding ways to decrease the pressure, and maybe even the hours and upping the pay (in an industry famed for

its low margins, it's certainly another cause of pressure). But how? At a time when it's increasingly difficult for restaurants to find qualified, urgently needed back-of-the-house staff, such changes would be difficult.

In the end, opinions of Bourdain and his death largely depended on the viewer. For the fans, they lost the guy who was living their dream and showed them the world. For Latino cooks, they lost the guy who made them visible. For chefs, they lost one of their own or the guy who "got out." But still, what does it mean?

If there's to be meaning in Bourdain's passing—on top of Loiseau and Violier before him—it might be a movement toward real change in an industry that is characterized by hospitality, but comes with crushing pressure. Perhaps there could be movement to provide the one thing everyone agrees is needed: help.